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The Strategic Challenge of Society-centric Warfare

Ariel E. Levite and Jonathan (Yoni) Shimshoni

Some 40 years ago, Michael Howard reminded us that strategy should comprise four dimensions – operations, technology, logistics and society.¹ In his 1979 article for *Foreign Affairs*, ‘The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy’, he chastised strategists who failed to consider all four in an integrated fashion and to identify which is dominant in a particular situation, warning that doing so could result in poorly formulated and even dangerous strategies.² Howard argued that the social dimension was mostly forgotten in the twentieth century, even though Carl von Clausewitz, writing more than 200 years earlier, had underscored the importance of popular passions (‘the people’) as one of the three elements of war that together formed his ‘remarkable trinity’.³ The oversight is all the more noteworthy given the decisive role played by societies in shaping the outcomes of a number of strategic encounters, the war in Vietnam being a prominent twentieth-century example.

Howard’s admonition came in the midst of the Cold War, at the heart of which lay strategies that threatened to annihilate all of humankind. That conflict provides a dramatic example of how technological advances (in this case, nuclear weapons) can blind the West from seriously considering the social dimension when formulating strategy.⁴ Howard’s observation is no less relevant today, in a conflict environment characterised by a new set

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of technologies, including high-accuracy and autonomous conventional weapons, sensors, communications, computing and artificial intelligence.

While the social dimension has long been deeply ingrained in warfare and strategy, its centrality to twenty-first-century conflict has become extreme. Virtually all the actors now challenging the West – large and small, state and non-state, from al-Qaeda and Hamas to China and Russia – have adopted multifaceted strategies with society at their core. Indeed, these could be called society-centric strategies.⁵

Those Western powers most directly engaged in military confrontation – especially the United States and Israel, but also France, the United Kingdom and other NATO members, as well as Australia – have made important adaptations to address these challenges.⁶ Yet none of them has fully come to terms with the rise of society-centric conflict. This shortfall, while understandable, can have serious unintended consequences, among them the preparation of misguided strategic assessments and the pursuit of impractical goals, resulting in unmet expectations, frustration, and civil–military and political friction. This essay explores the evolution, manifestations and logic of society-centric warfare, and reflects on its implications for apposite Western strategy formulation.

The social dimension

Regardless of the particular form it assumes, warfare is essentially a confrontation between societies; hence, the social dimension of strategy is always pertinent. Indeed, it could be seen as *primus inter pares* with respect to the other dimensions. Societies on all sides of a confrontation are typically tested in terms of their willingness to support (or otherwise influence) their leaders and warriors, to make sacrifices and demonstrate resilience, and to provide fighters and other resources for the fight. Unsurprisingly, leaders and strategists throughout history, when faced with or contemplating conflict, have been preoccupied with the future, behaviour and role both of their own societies and those of their adversaries.

Typically, strategists' first task in dealing with a society-oriented challenge is to buffer their own societies from the vagaries of war while mobilising their support, or at least their acquiescence. In some cases,

strategists endeavour to 'de-societise', or detach, their own society from a conflict (for example, through the use of mercenaries and proxies) as a means either of enabling the state to pursue the conflict without engendering internal resistance, or, conversely, to avoid any build-up of social pressure to pursue or escalate a conflict. In other cases, leaders, perhaps perversely, do the opposite by putting their own citizens in harm's way, either as a deterrence strategy (as in the case of mutually assured destruction) or as a means of mobilising the population's support and garnering solidarity from other communities. In addition, leaders and strategists have often had to confront the corresponding challenge of undermining or otherwise shaping the adversary society's support for its own leadership and warriors, while either mobilising or keeping at bay any third-party societies which may have an interest in, or could potentially influence, the conflict.

Despite the perennial relevance of the social dimension, history has witnessed significant fluctuations in its centrality and role in strategy. In pre-modern contests of champions (as between David and Goliath) it was nearly absent from strategic consideration, a characterisation that also applies to medieval contests between knights and, later, to wars of mercenaries. This exclusion was possible largely because strategists on both sides could safely assume that their respective societies would accept (perhaps involuntarily) the outcomes of any contest in which they played no direct role, even when such confrontation had real bearings on their fortunes.

In other instances, the social dimension has been much more important, if not decisive. In these cases, it has been a critical enabler of leaders' strategies by facilitating the leveraging of the technological, operational or logistical dimensions. Howard, for example, saw Union strategy in the US Civil War in this light. Per his reading, the North enjoyed a logistical advantage, made possible by its social and economic wherewithal, that allowed it to circumvent the Confederacy's superiority in operations. In the Second World War, American wealth and social mobilisation combined with the exceptional sacrifices made by Soviet society to enable the technological and logistical superiority needed to overwhelm German operational excellence. Israel's strategy in the run-up to the Six-Day War is yet another example. Socio-economic constraints – the vulnerability of the Israeli population,

the country's heavy dependence on a reserve army, and the expected toll of this army's mobilisation on the economy and society – dictated particular strategic principles. These included intolerance for protracted inactive mobilisation and the initiation of actual hostilities to break a fully mobilised and armed standstill, as well as a rapid offensive and conclusive blitzkrieg into enemy territory. These, in turn, leveraged Israel's superior human and social capital, and its small geography (in military parlance, its 'interior lines'), to create an operational advantage that offset the logistical and numerical edge enjoyed by the country's enemies.

In some situations, the social dimension is so central (Howard would say 'dominant'⁷) that it could be described as the principal foundation of a strategy. Where this has been the case, action on other dimensions is intended to endow strategic advantage through the social realm. Examples abound: early in the Peloponnesian War, for instance, the Athenian strategist Pericles, facing a technologically and operationally superior Sparta and a wary Athenian society, elected to evacuate the rural battlefields, an intense strategic move applied to his own society. It was designed to deprive Sparta of the opportunity to exploit its absolute advantage in land-based battles of annihilation, while allowing Athens to apply its own force with a societal logic, aiming to induce helot slaves to rise up against Spartan society to drive internal weakening.⁸ Any number of historic sieges, blockades, sanctions, episodes of indiscriminate killing and forced migrations could also be considered instances of society-centric strategies. The often brutal conquest and subjugation of local societies by the European colonial enterprise represents an obvious application against militarily inferior foes, while Mao Zedong's guerrilla-warfare doctrine demonstrates a society-centric theory of victory, one that was dramatically and effectively implemented by the North Vietnamese against the otherwise superior US during the Vietnam War. At a sophisticated extreme, strategists have leveraged their opponents' actions on, say, the technological or operational dimensions to create a decisive advantage on the social front. A case in point is Mahatma Gandhi's Judo-like employment of passive resistance in the face of British brutality, which was intended to help Indians prevail over their militarily superior opponents by manipulating British and international opinion.⁹

Although this analysis has presented strategy formulation as a series of discrete choices, it is important to note, firstly, that the interplay between the various dimensions of strategy is often dynamic as strategists make adjustments in response to changing conditions. For example, Germany began the Second World War with an operations-dominant strategy. When victory proved elusive, however, it reverted to attacking British society directly with the intention of knocking the country out of the war through demoralisation. Correspondingly, as patience waned and frustration grew among the Allies, their strategy evolved from a rather classical approach centred on military-to-military operations to one centred on the massive conventional firebombing of cities in Europe and Japan, which ultimately escalated to the devastating nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

It is also important to understand how the assessment of the social dimension informs strategy development. The formulation of strategy is typically preceded by an assessment of both sides' critical vulnerabilities and relative strengths, and of any risks and opportunities across the four strategic dimensions. Importantly, even when such an assessment identifies the social dimension as critical, the resultant strategy may not necessarily be society-centric. The strategy developed by Israel's David Ben-Gurion in the late 1940s and 1950s is a case in point. His analysis concluded that Israeli society, which was then economically poor, had a high proportion of immigrants and was situated on a rather tiny piece of real estate, could not possibly withstand an extended conflict on Israeli territory. This judgement led him to formulate the operations-centric strategy described earlier, which was designed to offset these critical social vulnerabilities.

Societal challenge in the twenty-first century

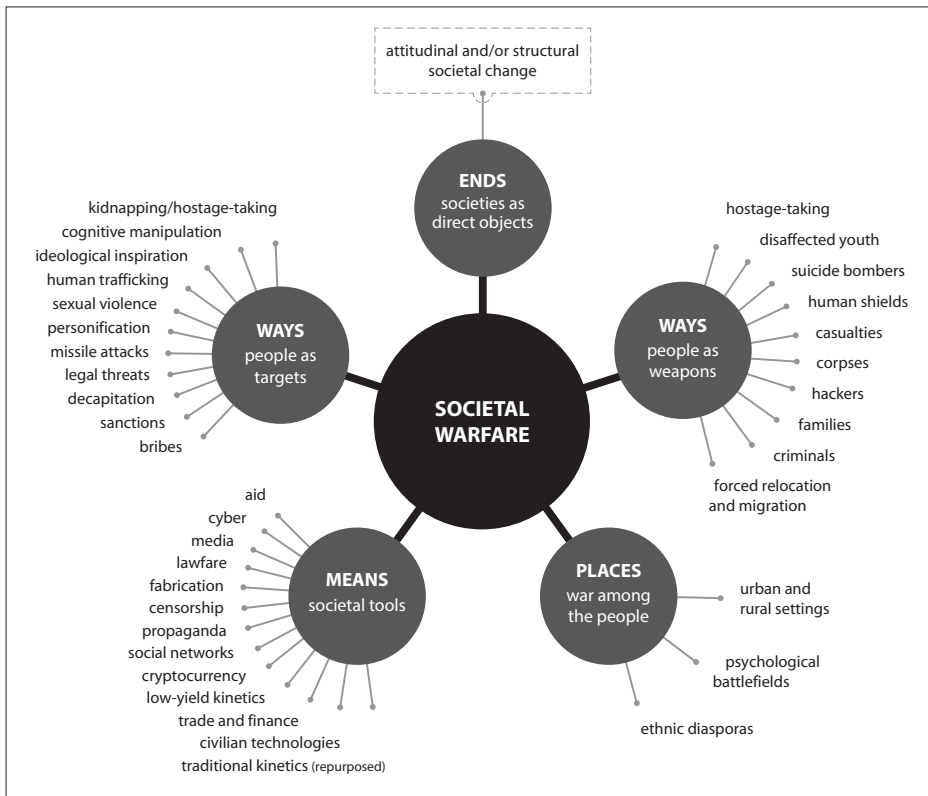
Although the relative importance of the various dimensions of strategy has fluctuated over time, the social dimension appears to have appropriated centre stage in the twenty-first century, both in general terms and in the specific context of the challenges currently faced by the West. Some scholars and practitioners have begun to explore this development and to analyse its relevance to particular types of challengers, for the most part smaller, non-state entities.¹⁰ Nevertheless, we believe that society-oriented

or -centric challenges are today even more prevalent and comprehensive in nature than has been understood (or at least acknowledged) by scholars and strategists, and that this has profound implications for strategy formulation in the West. While we cannot exclude the possibility of a 'classical' technology- or operations-driven direct military clash between the US and China, such as over Taiwan or the East or South China seas, or with Russia, perhaps over the Baltic republics, these types of scenarios have become increasingly rare. Instead, strategies in which the West's challengers position social impact as the driving logic of actions on the technological and operational dimensions have become far more prevalent. This trend is apparent not only among smaller, non-state actors, but also applies to the West's peer rivals – Russia and China. In short, society-centric strategies have become mainstream.

Contemporary society-centric strategies are not only more prevalent, but have also become all-encompassing. They increasingly manifest a choice by strategists to influence, engage and penetrate, at an early stage, *all* of the societies relevant to a conflict, so as to achieve a variety of aims: offensive, defensive, deterrent and compellent. In addition, these strategies have become comprehensive in terms of the wide array of tools they employ. They apply military technology and operations to achieve direct and indirect societal impacts, while at the same time 'weaponising' and employing toward the same aim a plethora of social tools, dual-use technologies, the law, social networks, cyber, demographics and economics. Figure 1 depicts how people, organisations and civilian technologies and processes have themselves often become, separately and at times in concert, the direct goals (or ends) of conflict, the venue or battlespace chosen for operations, the weapons (means) and the methods (ways) applied.¹¹ One might term this phenomenon 'societal warfare', that is, warfare conducted by, within, through and against people and societies.

The choice by the West's adversaries to engage in this kind of warfare is usually motivated by their societies' relative weakness on the traditional, military-to-military operational and technological dimensions – and in some cases by their own social vulnerabilities – and is enabled by changes in technology, global society and economics. Other inducements include

Figure 1: Twenty-first-century societal warfare



Western states' social penetrability, as well as a belief that the West is both structurally vulnerable and ill-prepared to confront such challenges.

Such all-encompassing, society-centric strategies are evident among the non-state challengers of Western nations, such as the Islamic State (ISIS). The group is well known for its brutal physical violence against civilians, images of which it has distributed through social and mainstream media in order to create certain psychological effects, pacify conquered areas and peoples, and penetrate and influence Western societies, not least to recruit and mobilise warriors to conduct operations on their own. In a different theatre, Hamas has been purposeful and effective in employing unarmed civilians, especially women and children, to conceal its warriors and to induce Israel to apply tremendous kinetic force in Gaza both to accord its own fighters immunity, and to leverage the resulting civilian casualties and

physical destruction to influence all the societies relevant to the group's conflict with Israel – in Europe, the US, Israel, the wider Middle East and Gaza itself. Hizbullah, similarly, has focused its strategy vis-à-vis Israel on the social dimension and, like Hamas, has put civilians in harm's way by concentrating key military assets within heavily populated areas (as well as in schools, mosques and hospitals), and even by using ambulances for military operations. The key difference is that Hizbullah, which enjoys significant assistance from Iran, does so on a larger and more sophisticated scale. In pursuit of a deterrent threat that circumvents Israeli technology and offensive manoeuvre and fire operations, it has been systematically building up a

Russian strategy blurs classical distinctions

diverse arsenal of some 150,000 rockets and missiles to target the entire Israeli population, while engaging in a massive propaganda and intimidation effort, much of it aimed directly at Israeli society.

Moving on to the competition between the West and its peer challengers, Russia's contemporary non-linear-warfare doctrine, in keeping with the tsarist and, even more so, Soviet–Leninist strategic tradition, reflects a society-centric paradigm. It is a multidimensional and multidisciplinary strategy that consciously blurs the classical distinctions between warriors and non-combatants, front and rear, peace and war, state and proxies, and fact and fiction; and which employs a variety of tools – military technology and operations, information and cyber, economic pressure, ethnic bridgeheads and sensitivities – in order to manipulate both rival societies and its own. By engaging in extensive deceit, deception and subterfuge, 'dispersing' confrontations to a number of different 'fronts', and 'diluting' the stark and unmistakable elements of military technological and operational action, the Russians have been challenging Western interests while remaining under the traditional *casus belli* threshold – a kind of twenty-first-century 'salami strategy'. Russia has applied elements of this society-centric approach in Chechnya, Crimea, Ukraine (and Eastern Europe more generally), Syria and with extensive meddling in US and Western European society and politics, directly targeting pre-identified societal groups and individuals.¹²

Seeing itself as being in an existential confrontation with an aggressive and revisionist West that has both domestic and international dimensions, Russia's strategy devotes much attention to all relevant societies. Even when formulating and executing offensive strategy, Russia directs considerable energy inward, to buffer its own society from any independent (particularly Western) sources of information and other means of influence, while employing a massive domestic censorship and propaganda machine, as well as more aggressive and sinister acts of intimidation, such as the selective elimination of regime opponents both in Russia and abroad. Local society is fed heavy doses of government propaganda to mobilise support for the state, while the regime acts simultaneously to maintain its freedom of action by de-societising – that is, by keeping Russian society in the dark about the actual costs (in resources and casualties) endured in conflicts it chooses to pursue. Russian strategy also endeavours to influence Western societies directly through attempts to penetrate and manipulate domestic processes via highly targeted campaigns, enabled by the new world of cyber and social media. These methods are rendered effective by virtue of striking Western (that is, liberal-democratic) weak spots that Western societies have difficulty in defending. They are also methods that the West is loath to use in retaliation.

Like Russia, China sees its confrontation with the external world as being closely intertwined with its domestic politics. China treats the social dimension as critical in its competitive relationships both generally and in the particular case of a potential future conflict with the US. In China, this orientation draws on a long history of society-oriented strategic approaches, stretching from Sun Tzu to Mao, of whom the latter's strategic framework and philosophy continue to guide and underlie Chinese strategic culture. It is evident in both the offensive and defensive realms, with the defensive realm being of particular contemporary significance in light of repeated and brutal colonial incursions by Japan and the West. A symptom of China's basic contemporary orientation is the social-political nature of its threat perception, which, like Russia's, focuses to a large extent on foreign – especially Western – ideological and cultural penetration as a major strategic threat. Western economic clout also looms large, and any dependence on

Western economies is perceived to be an acute source of vulnerability, a kind of Trojan Horse.

China's strategic response is similar to Russia's, but also distinct.¹³ As embodied in the country's own variant of multi-domain warfare, the Chinese pursue, both offensively and defensively, the logical integration of traditional military technologies and operations with a variety of societal tools and capabilities encompassing geo-economics and demographic manipulation (including forced migrations and resettlement); information, propaganda and cyber; and diverse mechanisms for strict and intensifying domestic control and mobilisation. In pursuing its strategy, China exploits two related advantages that Russia has not: conventional military power and economic wherewithal. Developing economic (and related technological) strength has enabled China to build a formidable, all-domain military machine in keeping with the slogan 'rich nation strong army', one that is powerful enough to give the US (and its allies) serious pause in considering a conflict over Chinese territorial claims and aggression on its periphery. This aspect of China's strategy is more operations- and technology-centric, and in recent years has greatly amplified societal mobilisation to drive the technological dimension. One could reasonably claim that China has a dual-mode strategy that is at once technology- and society-centric.

China applies its economic clout to moves aimed directly at the social dimension both at home and abroad. Some of the latter are intended to disrupt the Western alliance system in Asia. These include various Belt and Road initiatives, China-led alternatives to World Bank-like institutions (such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank), and outright economic coercion (for example, of the Philippines). Direct attitudinal and cognitive operations include undertakings such as Confucius Institute activities on university campuses worldwide. On the domestic front, the state imposes extreme measures to both fan nationalist sentiments and ensure tight control of information flows within its own society. At the same time, Chinese economic development has created a wealthy elite with a loyalty stake in the system.

China also makes more direct strategic use of its economic clout as a deterrence tool. It has sent a clear message to the US that, in the event of hostilities, it will not afford Americans the luxury of limiting the exchange

to the traditional technological and operational spheres (in which the West will likely possess an advantage for some years to come). Rather, if necessary it will exploit its position in the Western economic and financial systems to wreak sociopolitical havoc. Remarkably, China has made skilful use of these techniques to target not only foreign governments, but also prominent foreign private-sector players and broad swaths of foreign populations, with the goal of motivating them to act as a kind of ‘fifth column’ in their home countries that would act to moderate action in the event of hostilities, even if aimed to check Chinese expansionism.

The West

An environment in which adversaries confront Western powers with predominantly society-centric strategies poses acute challenges for the West, particularly those Western powers that find themselves at the cutting edge of such confrontations. Yet the difficulty does not emanate from a Western inability or ingrained aversion to engage on the social dimension. On the contrary, Western states have themselves long displayed a willingness to coerce or otherwise influence adversary societies directly. At times, this aim has been pursued with great brutality, as in the colonial enterprise, the American West, and the firebombing of London and Tokyo. In other cases, efforts have been covert and underhanded, such as the practice of bribing drug lords to buy freedom for military action in Southeast Asia; and sophisticated, such as Dwight Eisenhower’s public Cold War diplomacy. Some attempts have involved the coercive application of economic instruments (such as the Iran sanctions), while others have employed constructive economic tools (such as the Marshall Plan). Western manipulative efforts have even been aimed at allied societies, such as the British campaign to sway American public opinion in favour of entering the Second World War; and domestically, as exemplified by the extensive disinformation-based manipulation of the American public by US administrations during the war in Vietnam.

There is ample evidence that Western strategists are slowly waking up to the sobering reality that the strategic environment has become rife with social-centric challenges. However, this understanding has been evident

mainly with respect to smaller and non-state challengers. In that context, various conceptual formulations have been devised, such as 'fourth-generation war', 'asymmetric warfare', 'new war' and 'war among the people'. In the US, new operational approaches such as counter-insurgency and stability operations have emerged, buttressed by attempts to establish organisational 'infrastructure', such as the Human Terrain System.¹⁴

In pursuing these operational constructs, Western militaries have exhibited a remarkable degree of adaptation. Thus, traditional force formations, armed with super-high-tech weapons that were designed for more conventional wars, have been fundamentally refashioned for societal settings. This

The IDF has a 'crisis management' mindset

has been done, for example, by focusing on the stand-off capacity to engage in the discriminate targeting of warriors and materiel with highly accurate (and in some cases very low-yield) munitions, uninhabited aerial vehicles (UAVs) and even battle tanks, and thus to avoid the risks (and casualties) of ground-force incur-

sions. Moreover, and in keeping with Western militaries' proclivity to meet operational challenges with technological solutions, a massive effort has recently been launched to leverage breakthroughs in artificial intelligence and telecommunications, with the aim of fielding autonomous fighting capabilities designed to enable Western forces to engage in messy societal conflicts without the use of ground troops (or 'boots on the ground'), thus sparing them the agony of physical friction with adversary societies. At a higher level of organisation, the US has attempted to approach such conflicts with 'all of government' or diplomatic, informational, military and economic (DIME) formulations, reflecting an understanding that addressing a society-centric challenge requires the application of multiple tools in a coordinated fashion.

Similarly, in its own 'long war' with Hamas and Hizbullah, Israel has made important strategic adjustments for what it terms 'campaigns between the wars'. In its approach to these extended periods between major flare-ups, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) command has adopted a 'crisis management' mindset. It employs a strategy aimed at preventing, or at least

postponing, major flare-ups rather than seeking elusive military solutions to these intractable conflicts. This approach is pursued through a thoughtful combination of various carefully crafted kinetic and intelligence operations on the one hand, and more directly population-oriented efforts on the other. Operations consist mainly of surgical airstrikes and special operations, but also encompass massive, technologically rich defensive deployments of missiles and anti-tunnel defences. These activities aim to enhance traditional deterrence and to prepare for war, but strive to steer clear of attacking or even indirectly targeting civilian populations. These operations are commonly accompanied by and integrated with large-scale communications campaigns aimed directly at adversary societies. They are designed to impress on them the perils of another round of military confrontation with Israel, their likely defeat in any such encounter and the pain their people will endure in the process.

The IDF's actions and words during its interwar campaigns are also combined to drive home the point that Israel is not keen for another round of fighting, and to dissuade adversary populations from supporting such adventures, a message repeatedly reinforced by conciliatory economic and humanitarian activity aimed directly at Palestinian, Syrian (especially in the Golan Heights) and Lebanese societies in general, and in Gaza in particular. This approach has found its most dramatic expression (given the visceral enmity between Israel and Hamas) in Israel's Gaza policy since 2014. The IDF (alongside the General Security Service) has been lobbying Israeli political leaders to encourage and facilitate significant improvements in Gazans' quality of life as a way to help avert wars of social desperation, and thus prevent another unwanted round of military confrontation. Indeed, the IDF and its related Ministry of Defense organs have recently gone so far as to actively solicit international help in providing humanitarian assistance and undertaking massive civilian reconstruction in Gaza.

In response to the targeting of their own homelands, Western states have become increasingly attentive to the strategic role of their own societies. This has mostly been reflected in a heightened emphasis on defensive measures. Western security responses, which have evolved gradually and often in a belated or ad hoc way, have aimed to protect domestic societies from physical

or cyber-based attack, as well as manipulation and subversion. Responses have included aggressive intelligence and police efforts, ever tighter immigration controls and transportation-security measures, cyber defences, country-wide missile defence (most prominently in Israel), selective censorship of social media, and (in Israel and the US) physical walls and border fences. In addition, Western regimes have acted instinctively to diminish the domestic social footprint of often contentious foreign operations by exploiting stand-off systems, minimising ground-force operations, and using special-operations forces and professional soldiers, as well as subcontractors and proxies, instead of conscripts or reservists wherever possible.

Despite the growing awareness of, and adjustment to, society-centric challenges by key Western militaries and security establishments, it is fair to say that their strategic responses still fall short. Firstly, there is a reluctance to recognise the prevalence and mainstreaming of society-centric strategies among all of the West's major rivals, and to respond in kind to this development. Thus, the US has remained focused on operations- and technology-centred military confrontations with China and Russia, devoting only modest effort toward society-centric strategies for small wars. By the same token, Israel's paradigm of action for war (as distinguished from its campaigns between the wars) continues to reflect a traditional and heavy-handed technology- and operations-dominant strategy, as though a classical military-to-military logic applies.¹⁵

Secondly, Western militaries and defence establishments have had understandable difficulty in responding holistically to the truly comprehensive nature of twenty-first-century society-centric challenges. Even where adjustments *have* been made to address the social dimension in small confrontations, the entire social ecosystem of a given conflict is rarely taken into account, and integrated consideration of offence and defence, or of all the relevant societies, is lacking. Thus, American counter-insurgency and stability operations do (by definition) account for and incorporate rival or target societies, but do not consider or integrate any analysis of the impact on (and requirements of) US and third-party societies. On the flip side, while homeland-security efforts have been made to defend against physical, informational and cyber attacks on Western societies, these have largely been

implemented without considering their impact on other relevant societies, and the strategic implications thereof. An extreme recent example of this is the hastily decreed and politically inspired US ban on immigration from several predominantly Muslim countries.

Israel, for its part, has been guilty of ignoring the broader societal ramifications of its actions. The IDF has devoted much innovative energy to the protection of its own society and to severing it from conflict. At the same time, it has invested extensive resources and much effort to diminish non-combatant casualties and minimise collateral damage in combat. Yet the IDF remains wedded to the application of immense kinetic pressure in operations, with only scant and superficial attention given to the impact of these military operations on adversary societies in Lebanon and Gaza, and relatively little consideration of their effect on Palestinian, Arab, Muslim and Western societies. Where the IDF does account and aim for societal impact, this is done more as an afterthought, peripheral to, or supportive of, the 'core' military effort.

*'Winning' may
not be an option*

Perhaps the most severe shortcoming is conceptual. For the most part, Western military strategists are still largely fixated on quickly and efficiently inflicting maximal harm to armed adversaries to secure a military decision. With the exception of insurgency or stability challenges, they have not yet fully grasped that enduring success may only be achievable on the societal battlefield. Indeed, in cases where conflicts are driven by rival sociopolitical motivations – as in the cases of the Vietnam War and Israel's conflict with the Palestinians – 'winning' may not even be an option. And while fighting and killing may be inevitable, 'bombing (longer and more intensely) to win' often serves only to make matters worse.¹⁶ Yet Western strategists have failed to fundamentally adjust the logic of their military operations in line with society-centric conflict or to drive the development of supporting holistic, integrated, behavioural-science-informed theory. In the absence of such theory, even when consideration of the social dimension does occur, this is mostly intuitive and misguided, and frequently leads to an ever stronger proclivity to further refine, upgrade and apply existing technological and operational solutions.

Western nations have been paying dearly for this mismatch between the nature and requirements of the society-centric battlefield and their own strategic responses. They have misread a range of contemporary challenges and opportunities, and pursued strategic objectives that are simply unachievable within established ethical standards and at acceptable prices. The result has often been frustratingly costly, agonisingly protracted and ultimately unwinnable external engagements. Recent cases in point include Western campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, Libya and even Mali. All of these conflicts illustrate the potential consequences of confronting smaller and otherwise inferior rivals on the wrong dimensions. Israel, for its part,

Israel has endured sobering lessons

has endured a series of sobering lessons in both Gaza and Lebanon, to say nothing of earlier Palestinian uprisings in the 1980s and 1990s. In all of these cases, Western forces have discovered that, while overwhelming military might and technological dominance can be leveraged effectively against classical combatants, they may ultimately fail against presumably inferior but very highly motivated adversaries that implement society-centric strategies.

If this is true of confrontations with dramatically inferior military adversaries, imagine the likely consequences of a Western conflict with peer or near-peer competitors that are no less adept at, and willing to engage in, society-centric warfare. Looking to the future, Western nations risk a debacle with profound political and strategic consequences if they engage in a society-centric confrontation with Russia, China or Iran without having adequately prepared. Some might suggest that this kind of confrontation is inevitable, or indeed, already under way, yet there is little evidence that Western nations have absorbed and adjusted to what is fundamentally a societal challenge. Worse still, a form of cultural blindness among Westerners rooted in a failure to understand how their adversaries see the world can only serve to make a confrontation more likely. Western nations may be unwittingly motivating their rivals to pursue confrontation by failing to see how threatening the West's 'peaceful' activities to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law appear to other countries – let alone less-than-peaceful interventions in the name of the Responsibility to Protect.

If the strategic mismatch is so obvious, and if the price of misdirection is so high, why haven't the US and Israel at least, as the Western states with the most to gain *and* lose, fully aligned their strategies to the society-centric environment? Three clusters of non-mutually exclusive reasons suggest themselves. The first encompasses organisational bias and bureaucratic conservatism. Mainstream Western militaries are fundamentally reluctant to conceive of their core mission as dealing with societies, whether their own society (which largely lies outside the legitimate constitutional scope of their activity) or those of its adversaries. Their deeply held self-identities, which in democracies are often constitutionally enshrined, compel them to regard their *raison d'être* as confronting adversaries' military might and achieving victory through conquest, destruction and killing. They live by crucial dichotomies such as war and peace, victory and defeat, combatants and non-combatants, front and rear, and legitimate battlefield and home front – distinctions that tend to lose their meaning in a social-centric environment. Western militaries recoil from any notion that their mainstay is high-intensity, open-ended commitments that embed them in politically fraught situations involving non-combatants and their own societies, that defy standard military metrics of effectiveness and success, and that detract from their focus on high-end confrontation with peer adversaries.

Secondly, there is strong political and cultural aversion among Western societies, and even more so among their governing elites, to acknowledge – and to educate their publics to accept and support – society-centric conflicts, which very often are open-ended engagements that are not aimed at achieving clear-cut victory in a relatively short period of time. This reluctance has immediate bearing on publics' willingness to provide the resources and make the necessary constitutional adjustments to come to grips with the challenges presented by society-centric warfare. This is a formidable problem, because the adoption of a society-centric strategic approach would have to be preceded by a truly painful choice to actually wage society-centric warfare, to confront its implications at home, and to accept that most Western states already engage in this kind of warfare, even if only inadvertently. These problems are further exacerbated by the objective difficulty of defining goals and missions in an amorphous society-

centric environment – a daunting and high-risk task that leaders are happy to avoid, often by simply denying the social nature of the challenge and the required response, or by taking refuge in Western societies' unmatched capacity to devise and field technological solutions.

The third type of barrier lies in the enormity of the task of adjusting to society-centric warfare, which would require much more than aligning military organisation and force structure. Doing so would entail a fundamental reorientation of how the military and defence establishments think and prepare to engage adversaries. It would necessitate a holistic theory incorporating a new language, a different set of variables and a logic that revolves around societal influence, an adjusted framework for civil–military relations, and even new ethical constructs. Thus far, neither of the parties that would be needed to bring this about – defence and military establishments, and academics specialising in the behavioural sciences – has shown any sustained interest in this project, though there have been important focused forays that could serve as a starting point.¹⁷

To be fair, all this would be a very steep order, and the evident reluctance among Western governments to take these steps is understandable. Yet the relevant strategic challenges will not go away simply because Western states are disinclined to deal with them. The time has come for Western military and political leaders, regardless of whether they favour isolation, restraint or intervention, to formulate the required strategy for this environment.

Formulating strategy for a society-centric environment

The military and security principals of all Western states aim to devise strategies that achieve high-level goals within the constraints, guidelines and considerations defined by national political leaders.¹⁸ Examples of high-level goals might be to 'conquer', 'expel', 'contain', 'stabilise' or 'defend against'. Examples of constraints or guidelines might include statements such as 'all-out war is acceptable'; 'hostilities, but without ground troops'; 'conciliation is out of the question'; 'in any case, keep us out of trouble with *x*'; 'do not target the adversary's leaders as we will need them in order to secure a settlement'; 'the time limit for execution is *y* weeks (note the lack of support at home for prolonged violent engagement)'; 'it is apparent that our rival is

motivated by internal political strife'; and 'our two sides have irreconcilable nationalist and religious aims'. In explicitly providing such guidance, or at least implicitly revealing such preferences, national leaders would also naturally steer the military toward a basic posture, such as defence, deterrence, compellence, outright offence (including pre-emption) or attrition warfare.

Some of these examples underscore the importance, in a society-centric strategic environment, of infusing the deliberations regarding high-level goals with a competitive consideration of the social strengths, weaknesses, vulnerabilities, motivations and intents on all sides of the conflict, alongside a high-level assessment of the societal dynamics and impacts that could flow from different modes of confrontation. This analysis would also consider how to 'sell' policy choices to various relevant constituencies, how to protect one's own society from any undesirable consequences of the selected goals, and how to maximise the desirable effects both on the adversary's society and on international publics, all while minimising any counterproductive impact on both the adversary's society and international public opinion. An important aspect of this kind of analysis and decision-making should be a hard critical look at the extent of achievable goals, given that the society-centric strategic environment has a way of playing havoc with strategies that aim for clear, deep and far-reaching achievements.¹⁹

The natural expectation is for military leaders to translate this guidance and analysis into a coherent strategy – an ends–ways–means chain or theory of victory.²⁰ Such an exercise should help identify the respective social vulnerabilities that need to be offset and the opportunities that might be seized upon in the course of a confrontation, including opportunities to address an opponent's advantages on the social dimension, or to circumvent them by emphasising another dimension. Importantly, serious attention must be paid to the social dimension regardless of which dimension is deemed central, as that is where the rival will likely be focusing its efforts.

Proceeding on the assumption that strategic planners do choose society as the central pillar of their strategy, they would then turn to formulating and operationalising this strategy with its particular set of concepts and logic, weaving it into the classical ends–ways–means construct. Attention should first turn to ends (or objectives), which in this case would pertain to both

the adversary's society and to the planners' own, in addition to any relevant third-party societies. Society-centric ends could include the restoration of societal support for an incumbent foreign regime, as in counter-insurgency strategies; hastening the establishment of a regime that enjoys popular support; encouraging social fragmentation and state disintegration; weakening or suppressing (temporarily or permanently) an adversary's social mobilisation and reorienting its problematic policies; and even mobilising (or demobilising) international society. As regards planners' own society, objectives might include protecting it from attack or subversion, creating support for the chosen strategy or, alternatively, de-societising the conflict with the goal, *inter alia*, of inducing public indifference.

Moving on, the socially oriented strategist would next need to concentrate on the ways to accomplish these goals. A first challenge would be to identify the social equivalent of the traditional military centres of gravity. Having done so, strategists would then need to determine how critical elements of the adversary society could be induced to perform particular actions or adopt desired attitudes, for example through coercion, persuasion, bribery, subversion, diversion or even positive inducements. Some portions of the society might need to be effectively pacified, say by decapitation, intimidation, detention, demographic control or relocation – threatened or actual. Strategic planners may also have to devise ways to interdict possible third-party interventions in support of the adversary, possibly by acting on global public opinion, allies, sympathisers and courts. And planners' own societies should not be overlooked: depending on the situation, physical or information-based protections may need to be devised, and informational and attitudinal 'engineering' (including calibration of expectations) may be necessary to mobilise society and secure its support. De-societising, for example by avoiding the use of ground troops, might also be necessary. Naturally, such analysis should be extended to relevant third-party societies as well. In any event, the choice of ways should not merely be guided by considerations of expediency, but ought to be governed by Western legal and ethical standards and constraints.

Finally, a coherent society-centric strategy must provide the means to enable these ways. These may include geo-economic tools, cyber operations,

the use of social media and other information channels, physical walls and missile defence, the employment of large conscript or professional forces, military alliances, and the use of proxies and subcontractors. Naturally, traditional military technological and operational arsenals might also be relevant. However, in designing their application, careful consideration must be given to their potential societal impact, so that they work together in synergy with the other selected means in support of the overall strategy. Most importantly, this approach rejects outright prevailing schemes featuring two separate missions, one directed at cognition and attitudes by applying 'soft' or 'sharp' means, the other kinetic in nature and aimed at battlefield results. Full integration is imperative.²¹

Inducements warrant special attention in society-centric situations because these may be most effective in swaying peoples' motivations, certainly when applied – in harmony with Thomas Schelling's work on the strategic role of promises and threats²² – in combination with coercive measures. In addition to humanitarian aid, these positive levers may include security assistance, reassurances and confidence-building measures with various factions in society, as well as geo-economic moves such as permitting economic development, promoting investment, or offering outright assistance to the targeted population as a whole or an especially important subset thereof. Such tools may be particularly effective when the desired end is to achieve long-term attitudinal change.

In a sense, the task facing the strategist can be seen as one of 'social engineering'. Hence, success in this endeavour hinges on developing operable theories of social influence and relating them to the employment of the more traditional technological, operational and logistical elements of war in concert with the newer – social – set of arrows. Digging deeper, this will require a profound and broad socio-psychological understanding of such elements as identity and affiliation, perceptions, emotions and motivations, religious beliefs and predilections, and attitudes to time – all of which are often infused with economic behaviour – both at the individual and the collective levels. In short, a bridge must be built between social theories of influence from the behavioural disciplines and traditional military science.

*Full integration
is imperative*

The aim should be to provide Western strategy a supporting model (or theory) of societal impact (and its limits) on which to draw for more apposite strategic analysis and formulation.²³

To be actionable and effective, such an approach will require a new conceptual language, translating socially oriented ends, ways and means into terminology that is militarily comprehensible. Traditional terms, such as ‘deterrence’, ‘compellence’ and ‘security dilemmas’, might still be applicable when related to societies, but will assume new meanings and may also have to be used differently. This is also true for core military concepts such as centres of gravity (*schwerpunkts*), combatants and non-combatants, front and rear, and peacetime and wartime. Furthermore, non-military concepts, such as conciliation and inducement, might have to be admitted into the military–strategic lexicon. Finally, and most critically, it will be imperative to jettison, or at least loosen the hold of, the seductive victory–defeat dichotomy, and replace it with the admittedly less inspiring idea of ‘success’. As one American general put it, ‘perhaps we need to ask at every stage of a confrontation “who’s winning”, but without expecting or striving to get to “who won”’.²⁴

It can be done

Lest this proposition seem too unwieldy, theoretical and ambitious, it is worth recalling that in 2007–08, the US did actually think through and formulate strategy along the lines envisioned here in mounting the surge in Iraq. The point of departure for this innovative strategy was the sobering realisation, late in the post-invasion period, of the dual challenge faced by Washington. The US was failing miserably in its efforts to arrest the accelerating violence in Iraq, to stabilise the country and even to effectively protect its own forces, having alienated critical parts of Iraqi society and destroyed sociopolitical infrastructure (such as local security forces) which could have assisted the regime in solidifying control. At the same time, these processes, with no end in sight, were quickly undermining political and public support in the US for this extended, bloody and unsuccessful engagement. There was also a growing realisation that the goal of building a Western-style democratic Iraq was ‘a bridge too far’, a mission that was not just unattainable but counterproductive.

Development of a more fitting strategy began with the attribution of failure to the 'disconnect' between the more classical military deployment and strategy employed theretofore, and the particular social dynamics prevalent in Iraq, along with the challenges that these presented. A critical first step in adjusting the US approach was to minimise and redefine mission goals, rolling them back from the earlier expansive and unrealistic idea of birthing a peaceful, democratic Iraq to the much lower benchmark of moderating the level of violence enough to allow the US to withdraw most of its forces. Another important redirection was to recognise and leverage the actual (as opposed to the wishfully imagined) dynamics of Iraqi society. This, in turn, dictated a shift in focus from the national leadership to local and tribal leaders to create alliances, muster support and gain control of the population in ways that were effective in Iraqi society, even though some of these methods sat uneasily with prevailing American military norms.

The surge in US force levels enabled the military to prop up local confidence, mostly by 'embedding' troops within local communities, physically compartmentalising rival groups in urban areas, and conducting numerous special operations intended to reduce insurgent fighting, limit the insurgency's financial capabilities and cripple its leadership. These activities were intended to promote confidence and catalyse local alliances, as a foundation for social-political moves such as expanding the Sunni Awakening, fostering economic and civil-infrastructure development, empowering the judicial system and encouraging reconciliation. They were reinforced by local public-relations and targeted-information campaigns in Iraq, as well as by efforts to maintain public and political support in the US. The success of this effort made it possible to fundamentally alter the situation on the ground, stabilising the country enough to rekindle support and patience back home and, ultimately, for the US to be able to dramatically decrease its military presence in Iraq.²⁵ The surge thus embodied an attempt to fashion a comprehensive and integrated strategy oriented around the social dimension, weaving together multiple elements – including traditional military technology and operations – but fundamentally subjecting their employment to a society-centred logic based on a deep understanding of the actual dynamics of Iraqi society.

It is true that the strategic reorientation of American strategy in Iraq occurred only after bitter setbacks, but this allows for a useful comparison of ‘before and after’. In ways that echo and illustrate important insights gained from the long history of British and French counter-insurgency, the Iraqi experience demonstrates that, when facing a society-centric strategic challenge, even one that is military or coercive in nature, the key to strategic success does not rest exclusively, nor even primarily, with the leveraging of classical technology or operations. Nor does it lie with the pursuit of military victory or even influence, much as hands-on coercive means may remain an important part of the strategic mixture. Instead, a multidimensional, society-centric strategy is called for, one founded on a deep understanding of the social forces at play on all sides, and on an analysis of ways to leverage these forces through the integrated application of various tools of force, society and statecraft.

The approach to strategy formulation described here is not offered as a ‘technical fix’ that can guarantee success. In a world of society-centric warfare, the ‘fog of war’ is likely to be even murkier than in the case of traditional technology- and operations-centric conflicts, further amplifying the fortune-setting roles of the unforeseeable and the incomprehensible – and of plain good luck. However, adopting this approach should minimally ensure that Western nations and their forces approach the correct battlespace with the right mindset, suitably trained and armed with the relevant equipment, and with a good understanding of the conflict’s guiding logic and rules of engagement. As Clausewitz himself put it: ‘The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish ... the kind of war on which they are embarking.’²⁶

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Notes

- ¹ The authors are grateful to Eliot Cohen for drawing their attention to Michael Howard's conceptual contribution and its relevance to this study.
- ² Michael Howard, 'The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 57, no. 5, Summer 1979.
- ³ The other two elements are usually translated as 'the army' and 'the government'.
- ⁴ We refer to 'strategy' as the embodiment of an actor's 'theory of victory' for a possible or actual confrontation, while 'confrontation' refers to an exchange of blows as well as to coercive postures (moves), such as deterrence and compellence.
- ⁵ While we believe that society-centric conflict characterises both domestic and international conflict, this essay focuses on the international expression of war and strategy.
- ⁶ Western states (principally the US, the UK, France and Israel) may have much in common in terms of the general challenges they face, but their strategic approaches display some significant differences, partly because the immediacy of various threats changes from country to country, and partly because of their differing histories. This essay focuses primarily on the US and Israel as the countries at the forefront of society-centric confrontations, but its findings are broadly applicable to all Western states.
- ⁷ Whereas Michael Howard used the term 'dominant', we have chosen to use the term 'central', as in our view it better conveys the idea of a dimension as an axis or a hub, in systemic and mutual interaction with the other three dimensions.
- ⁸ See Athanassios G. Platias and Constantinos Koliopolous, *Thucydides on Strategy* (Athens: Eurasia Publications, 2006).
- ⁹ Another illustration would be the strategy underpinning mutually assured destruction during the Cold War. While this might appear at first to be a purely technology-centric deterrent strategy, it may be more appropriately described as society-centric, for it rested on putting both one's opponents' and one's own societies at risk of annihilation, a strategy necessitated and then supported by advanced capabilities in the technological realm.
- ¹⁰ For a truly remarkable early foray into this territory, see Andrew Mack, 'Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict', *World Politics*, vol. 27, no. 2, January 1975, pp. 175–200. More recent studies include Roger W. Barnett, *Asymmetrical Warfare: Today's Challenge to US Military Power* (Washington DC: Brassey's Inc., 2003); Lawrence Freedman, *The Future of War: A History* (New York: Hachette, 2017); Efraim Inbar (ed.), *Democracies and Small Wars* (London: Frank Cass, 2003); Mary Kaldor, 'In Defence of New Wars', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1–16; William S. Lind et al., 'The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation', *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1989, pp. 22–6; Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground*

- Up: Twenty-First-Century Combat as Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); and Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991). For an ongoing discussion and exchange with respect to small wars, see *Small Wars Journal* at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/>.
- 11 Figure 1 also draws attention to the manner in which the application of traditional military technologies has been adapted to serve the logic of a society-centric environment.
 - 12 While there is general agreement that such a direct societal attack is a very serious matter, whether it should be seen as equivalent to an armed attack is a matter of some contention.
 - 13 For an interesting framing of Russian and Chinese strategies as 'comprehensive coercion', see Thomas G. Mahnken, Ross Babbage and Toshi Yoshihara, *Countering Comprehensive Coercion: Competitive Strategies Against Authoritarian Political Warfare* (Washington DC: Center for Strategy and Budgetary Assessments, 2018).
 - 14 For the US approach with respect to insurgency, stability and special operations, see *US Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (Washington DC: US Department of State, 2009); US Joint Chiefs of Staff, 'Stability', Joint Publication 3-07, August 2016; US Army, *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency* (Washington DC: US Army Headquarters, December 2006); and United States Special Operations Command, 'Doctrine for Special Operations', August 2011.
 - 15 While the IDF's impressive effort to mitigate the risk of international opprobrium for illegal or unethical behaviour on the society-centric battlefield may reflect an understanding that 'things have changed', the IDF has *not* amended its basic strategic approach, nor the core principles of its campaign planning.
 - 16 See Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).
 - 17 The integration of behavioural scientists in field combat units was actually attempted in the US Army Human Terrain System experiment in Afghanistan and Iraq. The difficulties of such bridging are illustrated by the experiment's demise. For an overview, see Christopher Sims, 'Academics in Foxholes: The Life and Death of the Human Terrain System', *Foreign Affairs*, 4 February 2016.
 - 18 This section attempts to present and argue for a way of *thinking* about strategy, and therefore presents a stylised process. In reality, strategy-making does not proceed in a strictly linear fashion, but rather is determined to a large extent by a country's strategic culture and by the decisions of domestic actors with varying degrees of political power.
 - 19 Of note in this regard is General Raymond Odierno's call in 2008 to come to terms with an 'irreducible minimum' level of violence in Iraq. See reference in Anthony H. Cordesman, Adam Mausner and Elena Derby, *Iraq and the United States: Creating a Strategic Partnership* (Washington DC: CSIS, 2010), p. 27. See also US Department of Defense,

'News Transcript Briefing with General Ray Odierno', 4 March 2008.

- 20 Although the formulation of ends–ways–means chains is presented here as a one-way, linear process, it is clear that military planners need to clear these with political leaders, a more circular process that may very well lead to the modification of high-level goals or guidelines and, of course, to amendments of strategic ends.
- 21 For an example of this kind of formulation in the Israeli context, see Gabi Siboni and Gal Perl Finkel, 'The IDF's Cognitive Effort: Supplementing the Kinetic Effort', *INSS Insight*, no. 1,028, 1 March 2018, <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-idfs-cognitive-effort-supplementing-the-kinetic-effort/>.
- 22 See Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).
- 23 As noted, important efforts have been made (mainly in the US) to come to grips with the new strategic reality through innovations such as 'all of government' thinking, and various operational and doctrinal adaptations such as *FM 3-24* (see endnote 14). Yet the former are scarcely implemented principles of organisation and process, while the latter, which sets out an approach that is limited mostly to situations of counter-insurgency, does provide a framework, but does not drill down to offer theory- or behavioural-science-informed direction for planning, action and societal impact.
- 24 Remark by US General David G. Perkins during a closed workshop/seminar on societal warfare at TRADOC Headquarters, Fort Eustis, VA, 11 April 2017.
- 25 We recognise that there is still significant disagreement as to the originality and impact of the surge. Our purpose is not to take a view on these debates, but simply to use the episode as an illustration of the way in which strategy should be assessed and developed when facing a society-centric challenge.
- 26 Michael Howard and Peter Paret (eds and trans), *Carl von Clausewitz: On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 88.

